CONTOURS OF ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS: A STUDY IN FICTION OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

With Special Reference to:

Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* and *Laburnum for My Head*

Dhruba Hazarika's *Sons of Brahma, Bowstring Winter* and *Luck*

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land*

Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*

A Synopsis Submitted for the Award of the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in English

Supervisor:

Dr. Lowleen Malhotra

Assistant Professor

(Department of English Studies)

Research Scholar:

Sarika Manwani

(English)

Head of the Department:

Prof. J. K. Verma

(Department of English Studies)

Dean:

Prof. Ragini Roy

(Faculty of Arts)

Faculty of Arts
Dayalbagh Educational Institute (Deemed University)
Dayalbagh, Agra- 282005
2016

Ecological concerns have been the subject of literature for ages. In the Vedic age, deities were considered as the personification of the natural forces. In *Rigveda* deities such as *agni* (fire), *Varuna* (air), *Soma* and others were religious forces of different natural phenomena. Unfortunately, with the passage of time, urbanization, capitalism, empirical science and technological domination have conspired to alienate man from both the Mother Earth and Nature. Many ancient cultures tell us how communities lived in harmony with nature, with a tradition of reverence for the elements that constitute the ecosystem- air, water, fire, sky, and earth. These five elements are interconnected, interrelated and interdependent. Deterioration in one element of nature inevitably affects the others. Man used to respect his natural surroundings and in turn the natural surroundings used to provide comfort and solace to them.

Nature should not be taken for granted. Whenever man has exploited natural reserves unethically, nature has also retaliated furiously in the form of floods, earthquakes, landslides and other natural calamities. Man might have reached heights of material growth but the importance of ecological balance for the survival of living beings cannot be overlooked. It is the self-centered consumerist who has disturbed the equilibrium between man and nature. In a natural system, the well-being of species is dependent on the growth and harmony of the whole ecosystem. Therefore, it is a fundamental and ethical responsibility of man to respect and protect nature, its resources and life supporting system. Nature is not merely a speck in the gigantic creation of the Almighty but it is the eye of all things, physical and spiritual. It is aptly opined by E. O. Wilson, *"*Nature holds the key to our aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive, and even spiritual satisfaction.*"* Thus, we need to make an ethical commitment to preserve our environment. Our inattention towards the mother Earth has been responsible for clashes between men. Wars and conflicts for

grabbing and exploiting the resources are global phenomena. When people are disempowered and often involuntarily displaced and deprived of resources, it fuels social conflicts like the underground armies against authorities, upsurge of violent forces and the mafia, etc that mushroom due to the erosion of life sustaining conditions. Thus, ecological and cultural restorations are necessary in the development of a national identity. According to Robert J. Brulle: "Questions about preservation of the natural environment are not just technical questions; they are also about what defines the good and moral life and about the essence and the meaning of our existence..." (Clark.1)

With the advent of modern machinery, the world has witnessed a marked change. Humanity has reached the heights of technological and scientific advancement. These technologies give a lot of comfort to human beings who are ignorant of the consequence of disturbing the equilibrium between the human and natural world. As a result, they are losing their natural-cultural heritage. Man has forgotten that the balance between these two worlds only can lead to a harmonious and peaceful life. Wherever a man sees an empty land, he establishes a factory or an industry only to destroy its natural beauty. Present human interference with non-human world is excessive and it is worsening the situation. Even then, nature shares its bounties as a mother. As William Ruckelshaus, an American attorney and former U.S. government official, says, "nature provides a free lunch, but only if we control our appetite."

Each epoch is ruled by certain dominant undercurrents that propel actions and reactions through human behaviour. In the modern times, man is blinded by ambitions, anxieties and fear of future. He is exterminating the natural wealth to achieve personal gains such as concretization of landscape, destruction of flora and fauna culminating in the extinction of species. According to Albert Einstein, "look deep into nature and then you

will understand everything better." But man is so much involved in the materialistic aspects of the world that he does not even have time to look upon and respect the natural beauty around him. We have completely forgotten that if we will cut trees, we shall not breathe, if we will pollute water, we are bound to perish soon. According to William Wordsworth: "The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: little we see in nature that is ours; we have our hearts away, a sordid boon!"

These impending catastrophic situations were also realized by literary writers and found a significant place in the literary arena as literature is the record of the impressions made by external realities of every kind upon great men and of the reflection which these men have made upon them. The subject matter of literature covers the whole range of human life and activity, as well as, every known manifestation of physical and spiritual world. The nineteenth century especially witnessed a number of developments in literature that ecocritics considered significant. American and British romantic writers took a particular interest in nature as subject. Victorian Realists wrote about industrialization which was changing the natural landscapes. Natural Historians began to write about new places and wildlife and pioneers and other travellers wrote their experiences with an emphasis on setting.

The ecologically-oriented and defining work of nature writing is *Walden* written by Henry David Thoreau in 1854. This classic work is a poetic narrative describing those two months which the author spent in a small cabin in the woods near Walden Pond in Massachusetts. Another landmark of American non-fiction work about nature was *Nature* written by R. W. Emerson in 1836. This essay is the writer's statement on the principles of the philosophy of Transcendentalism. Other American writers of this period whose works have been considered important by ecocritics include William Cullen Bryant, James Kirke

Paulding, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, John Burroughs and John Muir of the nineteenth century America, William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, John Keats, Lord Byron, P. B. Shelley are the poets of the nineteenth century who have shown their understanding towards nature. They celebrate the beauty of nature in their poems and their emotional attachment to the natural world and surroundings. The poets of the Victorian period include Thomas Hardy, Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, Thomas Carlyle, etc. These writers show their disappointment towards the destruction of the environment due to increase in industrialization. Two important books of criticism from the mid-twentieth century include *Virgin Land: the American West as Symbol and Myth* written by Thomas Nash Smith in 1950 and Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964).

The theory of ecocriticism reflects the need for understanding on the part of human beings to develop a harmonious relationship with the natural world in an age of environmental crisis. It was in the last decade of the twentieth century when it became obvious that the greatest problem of the twenty first century would be survival on the earth. Over-exploitation of natural resources and man's disregard for the air, the water and the soil, that sustain him, have given rise to the question of the survival of both man and the planet. The reflection of the struggle in the area of culture and spirit peaks for the urgency of action or urgent need to do something. Therefore, ecocritics have come forward with their novel plea to advocate the dictum 'Save the Planet.' Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where literary scholars analyze the texts or works of writers that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways in which literature treats the subject of nature. It is a broad approach which is also known as "green studies", "ecopoetics", or "environmental literary criticism."

Ecocriticism is the youngest revisionist movement that began in 1990's as a separate movement first in the US and in the UK. William Ruckert was the first person to use the term *ecocriticism* in his essay entitled "*literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism (1978)."* In this essay he defines ecocriticism as 'the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the bases for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world.' Cheryll Glotfelty is also one of the pioneers in this field. She defines ecocriticism as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment and one of the implicit goals of the approach is to regain professional dignity for the undervalued genre of nature writing.'

The term 'eco' comes from Greek word *oikos* which means ("house") and '*critic'* comes from *kritis* ("judge"). To the Greeks, *oikos* is a place where the sacred, the humans, natural and cultural phenomena are found in an integrated relationship. The eco-critical theory of *oikos* is also used to identify the Mother Earth concern in folktales from India. It also refers to planet Earth or *Bhoomi.* Hence, ecocriticism deals with the expression of judgment upon the writings which delineate relationship between nature and man or the effects of culture on nature. Ecocriticism has several sub-approaches, namely- *Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism, Ecosphere, Ecocide,* and *Oikopoetics.*

The phrase *deep ecology* was coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1973. It is an ecological and environmental philosophy promoting the inherent worth of living beings regardless of their instrumental utility to human needs. It emphasizes that one should see oneself not as an atomistic individual engaged in the world as a resource for consumption and self assertion but as a part of greater living identity. All human action should be guided by a sense of what is good for the biosphere as a whole.

Ecofeminism shows the pitiable condition and exploitation of both nature and women by men. It is known as androcentrism i.e. male centeredness which says that the force which is degrading or overpowering both the women and Nature is one and the same and that force is no one else but man. *Ecofeminism* calls for an end to all oppression. They argue that no effort to liberate women will be successful without an attempt to free nature. Ecofeminists divide the world into two groups- the privileged and the oppressed. The privileged group includes the upper or the middle class, human, technologically developed and male. The oppressed includes the poor, working class, non-human animal, underdeveloped nature and female. They argue that technological and industrial disasters first affect women, children and Nature. Ecofeminists and thinkers offer a view that very idea of dominating… nature has its origins in the domination of human by human.

Ecocide discusses the ecological destruction caused by human world to nature. The word is made by combining eco, which is originated from the Greek word *oikos* meaning ("*house")* and *cide* from the Latin word *caedere* ("to cut down or to kill"). According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, *Ecocide* is the destruction of large areas of natural environment especially as a result of deliberate human action.

Oikopoetics is the poetics of the *oikos* which to the Greeks meant habitat comprising the spirits, humans, nature and culture. According to Nirmal Selvomany, an Indian academician and scholar, "it is something that integrates specific space and time, nature-cultural elements, and human action."

Ecocriticism is an inter-disciplinary theory which is not only implemented by literary artists but also by the environmentalists, biologists, etc. It takes an earth-centered approach to literary study. It is not only the application of ecology and ecological principles to the study of literature but also the theoretical approach to the interlocution of

natural, cultural and supernatural phenomena. It cultivates the awareness that man has reached the limits of environmental destruction and is damaging the planet's basic life (soil, water, land, forests) support system. Literary writers and critics have tried to convey this message through their writings. They have written a lot about this aspect in their respective fields, countries or places they live in or visit. Along with the western writers initiating steps to create awareness about this menace, Indian literary artists also felt a great need to awaken the public of India towards the decline of natural beauty and natural heritage.

Nirmal Salvomany (B. 1953-) introduced this concept in literature through *Tamil Poetics*. His booklets *Tinai* 1, *Tinai* 2, *Tinai* 3 gave a strong momentum to ecocriticism in India. The term *Tinai* basically means 'Landscape' or 'To join'. It refers to "human community indigenous to a specific region." Its characteristic feature is its emphasis on land-life relationship.

The term Ecology was coined by combining two Greek words eco ("house or dwelling place") and *logos* ("the study of"). It is a branch of science that deals with the relations and interactions between organisms and their environment including other organisms. It also includes human ecology which is the study of interaction of people with their environment. The natural cycle and rhythm among all living organisms is getting disturbed by the imbalance between the human world and the natural world. This is causing a great harm to environment and natural surroundings. Modern age man has been responsible for large scale devastation of natural resources.

The term Consciousness refers to the state of being conscious and the power of self knowledge and internal perception about some particular object or state. Here in this study the main focus is on exploring the levels of consciousness in human mind towards the

importance of natural heritage, towards saving the environment, towards the conservation of natural resources land because the whole earth and its parts are working in an integrated system, which not only directs but also determines the pattern of life, and is also an indicator of environmental connection with living organisms.

The discussions on co-existence of man and nature got great momentum in other parts of India also like the North-East region, popularly known as the Seven Sisters, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. This geographical region is rich in eco-diversity and is inhabited by major tribes, namely, Bodo, Nishi, Garo, Naga, Bhutia and many others. Each tribe is distinct in character with respect to customs, traditions, language, costumes and festivals. English is a predominant language of these tribes and the population is mostly Christian. Agriculture is its dominant economic activity which binds them to the serene and sanguine nature and is a home to a rich variety of flora and fauna.

The main objective of this research is to identify and inculcate ecological consciousness through the medium of fiction written by writers of the North-East with special reference to Temsula Ao, Dhruba Hazarika, Mamang Dai, Mitra Phukan and Janice Pariat. They narrate the tales with their fingers on the pulse of the aborigines who have been helpless speculations to the erosion of beauty and tranquility of the North-East.

Temsula Ao (1945-) belongs to the *Ao* tribe of Nagaland and she voices the struggle of the *Ao* tribe. Her well-read anthologies of short-stories include *These Hills Called Home; Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for My Head.* She has authored eight books and was given the Padma Shree Award in 2007 and has contributed a number of articles on oral traditions, folk songs, myths and cultural traditions of *Ao* Nagas in various journals.

These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone is a collection of 10 short stories which reflect the lives of human beings who struggle to survive in the war zones. Another Short Story collection *Laburnum for My Head* is divided into eight short stories. These stories are about the lives of people from the vibrant and troubled region of North-East India.

The other fiction writer taken for the study is Dhruba Hazarika (1956-). He is a pioneer in Indian writing in English from North-East India. He was born in Shillong and completed his graduation from St. Edmund's College, Shillong and obtained his Master's degree in Economics from Guwahati University. He joined the Assam Civil Service in 1983. His debut novel, *A Bowstring Winter*, was published by Penguin India in 2006. His short stories have appeared in various newspapers including the *Sentinal* and the *Telegraph* in 1996. He is the recipient of the Katha Award for Creative Writing in English.

The collection of eight short stories *Luck* expresses the relationship between living organisms and environment. Ruskin Bond very truly says that, "wild tales with a difference… Hazarika's empathy with all creatures great and small comes through in these absorbing, spare and often deeply moving stories. Life in the forests and small towns of Assam is brought vividly to life by a gifted writer." The novel *A Bowstring Winter* (2006) deals with one winter season, the book itself being divided under the headings November, December and January. The book is on the whole an amalgam of human instincts and emotions. This tale of revenge and violence brilliantly evokes the sights and smells of North-East India while narrating a dynamic tale which addresses the universal themes of friendship, loyalty and the inherent loneliness of man. His second novel *Sons of Brahma* (2014) depicts the murky world of the underground and a bunch of equally ruthless government officials.

Mamang Dai (1957-) a journalist and former Civil servant, is another short-story writer taken for the present study. She was born in Pasighat in East Siang district of Aruranchal Pradesh. *The Legends of Pensam* by Mamang Dai is a delightful blend of myth and history of the tribe of *Adis* of Siang valley that spans Aruranchal Pradesh and Tibet. She brings her personal knowledge of the primitive customs and beliefs of her people to recount many legends that influence the lives of *Adis.* She writes, in our language, the language of *Adis,* the word *Pensam* means 'in between'. It suggests the middle or middle ground. It may also be interpreted as the hidden spaces of the heart where a secret garden grows. (Mamang Dai) *The Legends of Pensam* is a set of stories interconnected across a few generations of a family. There are a host of memorable characters steeped in traditional tribal beliefs. They lead a vulnerable life influenced by spirits, shamans, and unnatural events. The *Adis* practise an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world. This collection of short-stories reflects the necessity of maintaining harmony between the human and the spiritual worlds. Through these stories, the writer puts in front the harm which is caused to humans because of their ignorance of spiritual world and when they forget to perform some rituals, they are punished by gods or environment too.

Mitra Phukan (1953-) is an Indian author who writes in English. She is one of the most prominent literary voices in English from North-East India. She has written several books for children and won the UNICEF-CBT award for her *Mamoni's Adventure* (1986). Her novel *The Collector's Wife* (2005) is a novel set against the Assam Agitation of the 1970's and 80's. This is the story of Rukmini who is married to the District Collector of a small town in Assam, and teaches English Literature in the local college. On the surface, her life is settled and safe untouched by the toil and sufferings of the common folk. The

fear and uncertainty that grips the towns finds a reflection in her life. Assam is in the grip of insurgency and it is a threat that runs like a dark river through the novel and form its backdrop.

Janice Pariat is an Indian poet and short-story writer born and brought up in Assam and Meghalaya respectively. *Boats on Land* is a collection of short stories that offer a new way of looking at the world and India's little known North-East set in and around Shillong, Cherrapunjee and pockets of Assam. These tales are shaped against a larger historical canvas of the early days of the British Raj, the World Wars, conversion to Christianity, and the missionaries. According to Siddhartha Deb, "these stories announce the arrival of a startlingly brilliant and compassionate writer whose book is as haunting as the world it emerges from."

Many similarities can be found among these four writers as all these four writers belong to the North-Eastern part of India. They all praise the natural beauty of their lands. They all deal with the same issues of nature and atrocities on women, and importance of cultural and spiritual values in their short stories. Their main concern is the same i.e. to create awareness towards the excessive exploitation of natural resources and exploitation of women. They all show the destructive and seamy side of human beings mainly *man* who wants to over-power everything whether it is natural heritage or females except Dhruba Hazarika in his short-story collection *Luck.* Hazarika's protagonists have a soft corner for animals and they do not harm them rather they bring them home and take care of them, and in turn, get the same love and affection from those animals.

Thus, the present study is an application of the various approaches of ecocriticism on the works of respective writers of North-East. The main focus of these short story

writers is to inculcate in the readers an ecological consciousness to preserve the natural and cultural heritage of the world. The main objectives of this study will be:

1. To study the historical background of nature writings with special focus on Indian Writing in English.
2. To observe the interrelationship and interdependence between the environment and human existence on the earth.
3. To explore the application of ecocritical approaches like Ecofeminism, Deep Ecology, Ecocide and Oikopoetics to the selected works.
4. To study the cultural and value systems of the aborigines of the regions in North-East India.
5. To examine the various dimensions of environmental degradation due to negligence and insensitivity of man towards the ecosystem.
6. To make an in-depth analysis of the works of Temsula Ao, Dhruba Hazarika, Mamang Dai, Mitra Phukan and Janice Pariat.

The tentative division of the chapters for the present study will be as follows:

1. Introduction: A brief history of ecological consciousness with reference to North-East.
2. The Tenets of *Deep Ecology:* Works of Temsula Ao, Dhruba Hazarika, Mamang Dai, Mitra Phukan and Janice Pariat.
3. *Ecofeminist Perspectives:* Works of Temsula Ao, Dhruba Hazarika, Mamang Dai, Mitra Phukan and Janice Pariat.
4. The Concept of *Oikopoetics:* Works of Temsula Ao, Dhruba Hazarika, Mamang Dai, Mitra Phukan and Janice Pariat.
5. The concept of *Ecocide*: Works of Temsula Ao, Dhruba Hazarika, Mamang Dai, Mitra Phukan and Janice Pariat.

6. The Language of Ecocritical Writing.
7. Conclusion

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES:

- Ao, Temsula. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zon*e. England: Zubaan Books, 2006. Print.
- … *Laburnum for My Head*. India: Penguin Books, 2009. Print.
- Dai, Mamang. *The Legends of Pensam*. India: Penguin Books, 2006. Print.
- Hazarika, Dhruba. *A Bowstring Winter.* India: Penguin Books, 2006. Print.
- … *Luck.* India: India: Penguin Books, 2009. Print.
- … *Sons of Brahma.* India: Penguin UK, 2014. Print.
- Pariat, Janice. *Boats on Land*. London: Random House India, 2012. Print.
- Phukan, Mitra. *A Monsoon of Music*. India: Penguin Books, 2011. Print.
- … *The Collector's Wife.* India: Penguin Books, 2005. Print.

SECONDARY SOURCES:

Ambrosius, Wendy. *Deep Ecology: A debate on the Role of Humans in the Environment.* 2005. Print.

Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford dictionary of Literary Terms*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2015. Print.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination.* Blackwell Publishing, 2005. Print

Buell, Lawrence, et al. *Literature & the Environment*. California. 2011. Print.

Chandra, Joseph. *Classical to Contemporary Literary Theory: A Demystified Approach.* New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers. 2010. Print.

Chandra, NDR. *Modern Literary Criticism: Theory and Practice.* Delhi: Authorspress, 2003. Print.

Connor, Steven. *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism.* India: Cambridge University Press. 2006. Print.

Fenn, Vathana. *Roots of Ecocriticism: An Exploration of the Hstory of Ecocriticism, A literary Theory of Post-Modern World.* 2015. Print.

Funk & Wangnalls. *Standard desk dictionary*. United States of America: Lippincott & Crowell Publishers. 1980. Print.

Glotfelty, Cheryll and Fromm, Harold (eds). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens, Georgia and London: The University of Georgia Press. 1996. Print.

Goring, Paul, et al. *Studying Literature*. New York: Bloomsburry Academic. 2010. Print.

Gray, Martin. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms.* India: swan press. 2008. Print.

Guerin, Wilfred L., et al. *A Handbook of critical approaches to literature.* United States: Oxford University Press. 2005. Print.

Huggan, Graham. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge. 2010. Print.

Loomba, Ania, et al. *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond.* India: Duke University Press. 2005. Print.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Literary Theory Today.* New Delhi: Prestige. 2011. Print.

New practical standard dictionary: Britannica world Language. New York: Funk & Wangnalls Company. 1956. Print.

Phillips, Dana. *Ecocriticism, Literary Theory and Truth of Ecology.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins: UP, 1999. Print.

Rapaport, Herman. *The Literary Theory Toolkit- A Compendium of Concepts and Methods.* United Kingdom. 2011. Print.

Robinson, Daniel N. *Consciousness and Mental Life*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1893. Print.

Rudd, David. *The Routledge Companion to Children's literature.*

Russel, Paul - March. *The Short Story: An Introduction*.

Sharma, P. D. *Ecology and Environmnet*. Meerut: Rastogi Publications. 1975. Print

Tiwari, Manoj, Kapil Khulbe, Archana Tiwari. *Environmental Studies.* India: I. K. International Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. 2007. Print.

Tosic, Jelica. *Ecocriticism: Interdisciplinary Study of Literature and Environment.* 2006. Print.

Waugh, Patricia. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. United States: Oxford University Press. 2006. Print.

Webster's third new international dictionary. United States of America: G. & C. Merriam Co.

Willis, Martin. *Literature & Science*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan education. 2015. Print.

Wolfreys, Julian. *Introducing Criticism at the 21st Century*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2002. Print.